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Parental-leave rich and parental-leave poor: Inequality in Canadian labour market based leave policies

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Abstract

Canada has two parental leave benefit programs for the care of a newborn or adopted child: a federal program, and, since 2006, a provincial program in Québec. Informed by a social reproduction framework, this article compares access to parental leave benefits between Québec and the rest of Canada by family income and by its two different programs. Our analysis of quantitative data reveals that maternal access to leave benefits has improved dramatically over the past decade in the province of Québec, especially for low-income households. By contrast, on average 38% of mothers in the rest of Canada are consistently excluded from maternity or parental benefits under the federal program. We argue that one key explanation for the gap in rates of access to benefits between the two programs and between families by income is difference in eligibility criteria. In Canada, parental leaves paid for by all employers and employees are unevenly supporting the social reproduction of higher earners. Our article draws attention to the need for greater public and scholarly scrutiny of social class inequality effects of parental leave policy.

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Introduction

While it is now common for the majority of Canadian mothers to take a year off work to care for a newborn child, as a result of two employer–employee funded, government-sponsored leave benefit programs, a significant portion of mothers do not receive parental leave benefits.[1] Annual press releases reporting national coverage conceal variations between programs, and Canadians are left unaware of who is excluded from benefiting and the extent of their exclusion.

Since 2001, Canada's federal government has extended family care leaves as part of a 'special benefit' add-on program within the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program.[2] At the start of the millennium, parental leave was increased from 10 to 35 weeks; support for the care of dying parents and gravely ill children was initiated in 2004, and expanded in 2012 and 2015. Adding flexibility and extending parental leave duration to eighteen months was also put forward by the Liberal Party, which won a majority government in the 2015 autumn federal election. Meanwhile, the province of Québec exited the federal parental leave program within EI to create a more generous program in 2006, the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP).

There is no doubt that leave benefit programs help reconcile work and care, and retain employees. International scholarship has rightly focussed on how leave benefit policy design influences gender take-up and gender equality. What has not received sufficient public and scholarly scrutiny, however, is how policy design intersects with and influences social stratification. Leave benefit policies are key assets to families, providing the money, time, and job security to care for dependents. Yet leave benefit schemes are complex, and they are not universal. Very few countries, such as Austria, provide universal maternity leave (Rille-Pfeiffer and Dearing, 2015). This article analyzes the extent of access to leave benefits by social class, using family income as a marker for class. Our goal is to bring consideration of household inclusion and exclusion into the literature on parental leave. We ask the following questions: Do Canadian parents in Québec and the rest of Canada have equal access to government-sponsored parental leave benefits (maternity, paternity, and parental leave)? If not, what does this reveal about the extent of class differences? What difference has the province's exit from the federal program made for families in Québec? Finally, what are the implications for practices and theories of social reproduction?

With two parental leave benefit programs – a federal one for what is commonly referred to as the 'rest of Canada' (ROC) and one exclusive to Québec residents – Canada offers a unique opportunity to comparatively assess who, in terms of social class, gains support for social reproductive labour through paid parental leave. Our findings show a connection between class inequality and parental leave policies

in Canada. Mothers in households earning C$30,000 per year and above disproportionally receive benefits through both programs, but especially under the federal program. At the same time, Québec has dramatically improved the number of mothers supported through paid parental leave (by 25%), and particularly of mothers in lower-income families (with 42% more in receipt than in the ROC). Theoretically, our findings quantify the extent to which Canada's two labour market based parental leave benefit programs unevenly reproduce and exacerbate class inequality. Despite proportionate and obligatory contributions of all employers and employees to these programs, the distribution of benefits is unbalanced and aids the social reproduction of higher-income families, especially outside of Québec.

Our article is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief background to the field of parental leave research, pointing to three research gaps. Second, we locate ourselves theoretically and methodologically and describe the two parental leave models active in Canada. Third, we present data to show the inequality of access to parental leave in the country, identifying differences between the two policy regimes. We reveal that infants and parents in Québec are far more supported by the government than are those in the ROC and that it is lower-income households in Québec that have gained the most in that province. Our final section speaks to the implications of labour market based leave benefit policies for issues of social class equalities in access to government and employer support for receiving and providing care for dependents.

Parental leave research

Parental leave research has become a major sub-field of international work–family research over the past decade. One key finding from this research is that policy design matters in gendering care work in the first year of an infants' life (Baird and O'Brien, 2015; Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011; Mathieu, 2014; Moss and Deven, 2015; O'Brien, 2009). Ample attention has also been given to gender equality issues in parental leave take-up (e.g. Almqvist and Duvander, 2014; O'Brien and Wall, in press; Rehel, 2014; Wall, 2014). Three areas of scholarship, however, have been neglected. First, due to data gaps within and between counties, it has been difficult to compare the impact of policy design on access to benefit levels and duration of parental leave by social class (Moss, 2015). Second, there has been little interest in the complexities of intra-national contexts (Baird and O'Brien, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Third, in spite of a burgeoning attention to fathering and parental leave, there has been less focus on how access to leave by both mothers and fathers can lead to a situation of parental-leave-rich households and parental-leave-poor households. O'Brien (2009) raised this point, using 'rich' and 'poor' to refer to economic support, in her survey of the extent of father-focus in the parental leave policies of 24 countries. She argues that there are 'unintended risks associated with parental leave policy innovations' that extend access by gender without attending to class differences (O'Brien, 2009: 191). For instance, extending leave

to fathers or by duration without addressing eligibility criteria exacerbates the divide between families that are able to access leave benefits and those excluded from this provision. Some infants thus commence life in privileged families with higher access to money, job-security, and parental caregiving, while others are raised in disadvantaged, parental-leave-poor households with comparatively less economic support for parental care.

O'Brien (2009: 209) notes that the divide between infants born into these two contexts occurs at both the household and national level. There are a few Canadian studies that point to social class divides within this country. Hull (2013), for example, recently argued that Canadian Aboriginal teenaged mothers face significant barriers in accessing parental leave benefits, especially under the federal program. His analysis compared employment characteristics for this sub-population to EI parental leave benefit eligibility criteria. Hull's empirical evidence reinvigorated a class and gender critique raised earlier by scholars Campbell (2006) and Evans (2007), who, using legal and feminist analyses of policy design, identified shortcomings in the federal program that exacerbated inequalities among men, women, and families. For instance, excluded parents were defined by Campbell (2006: 7) as those who are unemployed or 'part-time, seasonal and unregulated workers, contractors, or students, who might have accumulated insurable hours of work over the previous months, but just not enough to qualify for subsidized leave'.

Up until 2010, Statistics Canada analyst Kathy Marshall published a number of important quantitative studies on gender and class take-up of parental leave. Since that time, however, there have been no further federal government studies on these topics. One of Marshall's studies found that in the federal program, mothers' earnings were 'clearly the overriding factor' in determining the length of leave mothers take from employment. In spite of a family supplement that raises wage replacement rates to 80%, short leave takers (returning to work five months after childbirth) had an annual income below C$16,000 and a family income below C$40,000 (Marshall, 2003). In 2010, Marshall demonstrated that one-fifth of mothers who received federal or Québec program benefits also received a supplementary 'top-up' benefit from their employer, adding, on average, C$300 to their income per week for 18 weeks (Marshall, 2010). Mothers working for a large, public sector employer and earning over C$20 per hour were most likely to receive a top-up and those least likely to receive supplementary benefits were mothers earning lower wages (Marshall, 2010). Marshall notes that her findings regarding supplementary, employer-sponsored leave benefits are in keeping with research that shows higher-quality jobs have better wages and better benefits. As Evans (2007: 127) put it, mothers are 'differently situated' in the labour market, with implications for access to parental leave.

Finally, our own qualitative studies, which included in-depth interviews on fathers' use of paternity and parental leave benefits, as negotiated by 26 couples in Ontario and Québec, found significant differences between those partners and families who were able to access parental leave benefits (see McKay and Doucet,

2010; McKay et al., 2012). Our research, the gaps in international parental leave scholarship, and the dearth of current quantitative Canadian research led us to specifically examine class equality in Canada's two parental leave benefit programs. Quantifying the existence and extent of class difference aims to assess the validity of O'Brien's (2009: 209) concern about a 'new global polarization for infants' as it applies to Canada.

Theory and method

Theoretically, we draw on feminist political economy approaches to social reproduction as a framework for analyzing the role of parental leave policy in employer/employee, state, household, and class relations. Although this is a broad field, we draw on just three of its many central tenets, building on the work of its leading authors (e.g. Bezanson, 2006; Braedley and Luxton, 2010; Fox, 2009; Luxton, 2006, 2009). We first highlight how a social reproduction framework attends to the 'dynamics that produce and reproduce people in material, social, and cultural ways', including the roles the market and the state play in mediating these processes (Bezanson, 2015: 13). We then draw on a second informing tenet, showing how a social reproduction framework articulates connections between reproduction and production, and between paid work and unpaid care work, with the state acting as a mediator between social classes (Bezanson, 2015; Cameron, 2006; Razavi, 2015). Cameron (2006: 46), for example, argues that:

> Conflict and compromises around the allocation of resources to social reproduction are central to understanding the relationship among social classes in different periods. These conflicts and compromises take place both within the sphere of production, around wages and working conditions, and at the level of the state, around regulation of the social relations of work and the family, the subsidization or replacement of the wage through income-support programs, or the provision of services to supplement or socialize household labour.

Finally, we use a social reproduction framework to highlight the plight of socially and economically marginalized persons, households, families, and groups, while giving corresponding attention to what might be done to alleviate systemic inequities that matter to enactments of care giving and care receiving. This connects our discussion to O'Brien's concern about a global polarization of support for parental care of infants as well as to broader ethics theorizing in care literature, including a recent argument by Tronto (2013: 40) that democratic caring 'presumes that we are equal as democratic citizens in being *care receivers*'.

Our methodology quantifies the extent to which families are able – or not able – to access Canada's parental leave benefit programs, comparing EI for the ROC, and QPIP for Québec residents. We sought to compare the size and characteristics of inclusion/exclusion to these programs as much as possible based on the available data. We chose to use national survey data as opposed to administrative data from

the two programs based on timely availability as well as data consistency and reliability. Administrative data was available from QPIP but not from EI without a lengthy access process. From an international perspective, in which inter-country comparisons are challenged by data compatibility, this article represents a unique opportunity to explore intra-national social class inequalities through the analysis of a single national survey that includes two distinct parental leave programs.

Our study is limited to the population captured in the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS), an annual national survey conducted by Statistics Canada on behalf of the department that manages the EI program, Economic and Social Development Canada. At the time of writing, the most recent data available was from the 2013 survey cycle. The EICS is designed to shed light on the EI program's coverage, with a focus on who does or does not have access to EI regular benefits for unemployment as well as special benefits, including maternity and parental benefits. The survey is administered to a sub-sample of respondents of the Labour Force Survey four times a year and asks respondents about their situation during the reference week in the month prior to being interviewed. The total sample size is on average 11,000 respondents, composed of unemployed individuals and others who, given their recent status in the labour market, could potentially be eligible for EI. The survey includes Canadians with and without insurable employment and it excludes residents of Canada's three territories and Aboriginal people living on First Nation reserves. Women with a child less than one year old were asked additional questions about maternity and parental leave, including questions about their spouse's use of parental/paternity leave.[3]

As qualitative researchers, we identified questions of interest in the EICS and paid Statistics Canada to undertake the cross-tabulation of variables. We chose the variable 'household annual income' as a proxy for social class. Data from nine provinces were combined to represent the ROC figures for comparison with Québec figures, and weights were applied to ensure comparability. It is important to note that the sample size for Québec for some variables in the EICS was too small, rendering figures unreliable and comparisons to the ROC impossible. The small sample size forced us to use large income categories and we were unable to report on Québécois responses to the variable 'reason parent did not qualify' (reported on later for the ROC), along with a variety of other employment and socio-demographic characteristics. We chose to only analyze mothers because maternity and parental leave are grouped together, and questions regarding usage are only posed to mothers; the survey does not ask fathers about their use of parental leave.

Situating parental leave and Canadian complexity

There is broad agreement that leave policy is complex (Moss, 2015). Across and within countries there is variation in the distribution and intersection of government-sponsored versus employer-sponsored leave programs, and differences exist in all aspects of policy design: funding, eligibility, wage replacement rates

(including 'floors' and maximum 'ceilings'), individual versus shared entitlements, as well as by parenthood status: biological mothers, fathers, and adoptive parents.

What is shared among leave programs is the precondition of labour force attachment. Leaves of absence straddle the intersection of employment relations and family life, and government realms of social/family policy and labour market policy. Leaves are a form of social security that cover a limited pool of participants; parents who have no job to leave can only be included through separate provisions, as noted is the case in Austria. This is distinct from social welfare, even though, from our theoretical lens, the impact is the same: to support the social reproduction of workers through socializing caregiving labour.

Canada has a federal government and 13 provincial and territorial governments. The decentralized, asymmetrical character of the Canadian federal state results in jurisdictional divides and intra-regime policy variation. Jurisdictional division entails a national transfer payment for health and social (welfare) policy designed and delivered by the provinces and territories (Boychuk, 1998). The federal government nevertheless offers select family care policies, including a universal direct payment benefit to parents for childcare, family tax breaks, and, analyzed in this study, wage-compensation leave benefits. Desiring greater control over its own affairs, Québec is the only province that has exited from a number of federal programs in favour of provincial programs.

A point we return to later in the discussion, the federal leave benefit program is partially synchronized with sub-national, employment standards legislation whereby each province and territory sets its own criteria for entitlement to job-protected unpaid leave. In Canada, there are regular reports to provincial human rights commissions of women losing their jobs when they return from maternity/parental leave (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015: 3). This indicates that not all employers are upholding laws enabling leave time for the care of children.

The Canadian federal state is categorized as a liberal nation among other Anglophone countries in comparative social policy research (Baird and O'Brien, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Québec, however, stands apart from other provinces and territories in sharing a number of social and political attributes with social-democratic countries (Mathieu, 2014; Paquin and Lévesque, 2014). This contrast is illustrated by Québec's creation of a relatively generous parental leave program as well as a universal low-cost childcare system (Mathieu, 2014), whereas the federal government has resisted a longstanding lobby for a national childcare plan, investing instead in parental leaves through the EI program. The consequence has been that outside of Québec Canadian childcare spaces are limited. Elsewhere we address why and how two parental leave regimes exist in one country (see Doucet, McKay and Tremblay, 2009) and the policy silos of parental leave and childcare in Canada in relation to social movements (Doucet and McKay, in press).

Parental leave in Canada is led by the public sector. In addition to two government-sponsored leave benefit programs, a federal government Supplemental Unemployment Benefit program provides an incentive for employer-sponsored

programs to 'top-up' government benefits.[4] Both the federal and Québec leave benefit programs are contributory wage replacement social insurance schemes funded not through general revenue but through a separate pool of funds. Employers are required to deduct employment insurance premiums (often called a payroll tax) from employees' insurable earnings up to a yearly maximum and contribute 1.4 times the employee amount. Insurable employment includes all employment under a contract of service where there is an employer–employee relationship. In 2016, the employee premium rate was 1.88% of earnings to a maximum annual rate of C$955.04, and employers paid a maximum annual premium per employee of C$1337.06. In Québec, EI rates are reduced and residents pay a separate annual QPIP premium of 0.548% for employees, 0.767% for employers, and 0.973% for self-employed workers to maximum insurable earnings of C$71,500.

Over time, the scope of the EI 'special benefit' program, including parental leave, has continued to expand by caregiver categories and duration of leave – but this expansion is compromised by contractions to the larger EI program. During the 1970s, a minimum of 20 weeks of insurable employment was required by mothers to qualify for 15 weeks of maternity benefits. In the 1980s, adoptive parents gained rights to benefits, and, in 1990, 10 weeks of shared-entitlement parental leave benefits were introduced (Calder, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Porter, 2003). In 2001, parental leave benefits were extended to 35 weeks. When mothers take maternity leave plus all the parental leave, their total compensated care time is 50 weeks. Self-employed workers were added in 2011. However, a defining feature of Canada's federal parental leave benefit program is its location within the far larger EI program for regular unemployment. Neoliberal policies in the 1990s impacting all beneficiaries reduced the wage replacement rate by 12%, from 67% to 55% (McKeen and Porter, 2003; Warskett, 2007) and increased eligibility from 300 hours to 700 hours of insurable employment in the previous year (with special benefits reduced to 600 hours in 2001) (Marshall, 1999). Thus, the continuing rise in federal caregiving leave benefits occurs within a retracted envelope: there are more possibilities for paid leave time for fewer workers and for less money.

Parental leave benefit program details

In 2006, the province of Québec launched a separate parental leave benefit program for employed and self-employed workers, called the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP).[5] Since then, the Canadian and Québec governments, through their respective parental benefit programs, have supported the caring capacities of new parents in different ways. As shown in Table 1, QPIP differs from the federal program in terms of accessibility by having lower eligibility criteria.[6] Parental benefits are available to any parent who has earned C$2000 or more during the previous tax year. This represents an extension to parents not covered by EI because eligibility is based on flat-rate earnings rather than on the number of hours worked. As a result, non-standard workers such as part-time employees,

Table 1. Parental leave in Canada and in Québec, 2015.

	Canada EI	Québec Basic Plan	Québec Special Plan
Eligibility	600 hours	$2000 earnings	
Self-employed workers	As of 2011	Covered	
Waiting period	2 weeks per couple	None	
Weeks by wage-replacement rate (% of average earnings)			
Maternity	15 at 55%	18 at 70%	15 at 75%
Paternity	None	5 at 70%	3 at 75%
Parental (shared)	35 at 55%	32 (7 at 70% + 25 at 55%)	25 at 75%
Total weeks per couple	50	55	43
Adoption (shared)	35 at 55%	(12 at 70% + 25 at 55%)	28 at 75%
Low income (net annual income <$25,921)	Up to 80%	Up to 80%	
Maximum insurable earnings (2015)	$524/week $49,500/year	$894.22/week $70,000/year	

Source: (Doucet, McKay and Tremblay, 2009).
Data: 'Employment Insurance Maternal and Parental Benefits,' Service Canada, 2015: http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/sc/ei/benefits/maternityparental.shtml and 'Québec Parental Insurance Plan,' Emploi et Solidarité sociale, Québec, 2015: http://www.rqap.gouv.qc.ca/includes/tableaux/tab_synthese_prestations_en.html
Notes: (1) Only birth mothers are entitled to maternity leave in both plans; (2) both jurisdictions recognize same sex relationships; (3) QPIP also has a plan for adoptive parents, whereby the total number of adoption benefit weeks (37 weeks – 12 at 70% + 25 at 55% of income – under the basic plan and 28 weeks at 75% of the income under the special plan) may be taken by one of the two adoptive parents, or shared between them.

contract workers, many students, and the self-employed are entitled to receive benefits. Under EI, although maternity and parental leave benefits were extended to the self-employed in 2011, eligibility criteria are more restrictive. In order to receive maternity/parental benefits, self-employed parents outside of Québec must have registered one year previously, and qualify only if they have reduced the amount of time devoted to their business by more than 40% because of childbirth/caring, paid contributions, and earned at least C$6646 (in 2015) from self-employment in the previous 52 weeks.

The Québécois parental leave program is also more generous. In 2015, the annually adjusted maximum insurable income in Québec was C$70,000, meaning that Québécois parents could receive up to C$894 per week, compared with C$524 with a ceiling of C$49,500 in the ROC. Under QPIP, new parents also have a choice between a smaller percentage of their usual income for a period of almost one year (the basic plan) or a higher income for a shorter leave (the special plan). Each plan includes a 'use it or lose it' individual-entitlement paternity leave of three to five weeks.

Findings: Access inequality among mothers

Canada's federal government has consistently obscured mothers' uneven access to maternity and parental leave by reporting national statistics, which are inflated by Québec's rates of access. The claim that 'two-thirds of mothers receive EI parental leave benefits' is overstated (Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), 2013/2014: Chapter 2, IV, 2.2). When the figures for mothers are calculated by program, thereby separating the ROC and Québec, differentiated access to maternity and/or parental benefit is unveiled. Figure 1 shows that in 2001 and 2004 Canadian and Québécois mothers received proportionally similar benefits.[7] This trend diverged after the establishment of QPIP. From 2007 on, an increasing proportion of Québécois mothers received benefits, whereas the same trend is not observed under EI in the nine provinces. Between 2007 and 2013, the proportion of eligible mothers who received maternity and/or parental benefits seemed to be increasing nationally. If Québec is removed from the equation, however, a different trend is revealed: the proportion of mothers who received benefits remained stable. During that period, the proportion of Québécois mothers receiving maternity or parental benefits rose by 8.8 percentage points, from 80.5% in 2007 to 89.3% in 2013, while in the other provinces, the proportion of women receiving maternity and/or parental benefits remained relatively stable from 61.4% in 2007 to 64.2% in 2010 and 64.3% in 2013. This reveals a growing gap between the two plans, with 25 percentage points more mothers in Québec receiving benefits under QPIP than under the EI program in the rest of the country. The proportion of

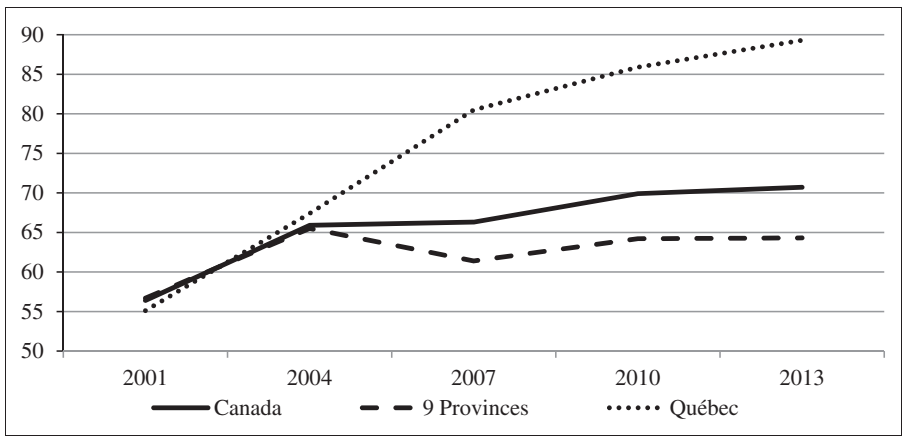

Figure 1. Proportion of mothers receiving maternity and/or parental benefits, in Canada, Québec, and 9 Provinces, 2001–2013.
Source: Statistics Canada EICS 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2013, custom tabulation.
Note: The data includes self-employed workers. In Québec self-employed workers became eligible in 2006, and in the ROC, in 2011.

mothers who received EI parental leave benefits is not two-thirds (67%), but less, at 64%, of all mothers outside Québec.

Which families? Receipt of benefits by household income

Central to analyzing the percentage of mothers in receipt of maternity and/or parental leave benefits is the question of which parents get more support through better access to parental leave benefits in Canada. In O'Brien's (2009) terms, which families are parental-leave rich and parental-leave poor? In Figure 2 we compare mothers' receipt of benefits by household income and by program for 2013. The figure reveals that in each family income bracket, more mothers qualify to receive benefits in Québec than in the rest of Canada, and that higher-income families have better access to parental benefits in both programs.

Figure 2 also shows stronger support for social reproduction in Québec than in the ROC; proportionally more parental-leave rich families received QPIP than EI. In Québec, in 2013, 95% of families with an income of C$60,000 and above received benefits, compared with 89.8% of families with an income between C$30,000 and C$60,000. Under EI in 9 provinces, the difference in receipt of parental leave benefits is also five percent between middle- and upper-income families.

We also see in Figure 2 that in 2013 the parental-leave poor are mostly low-income Canadian mothers who live outside Québec; only 44% of families with less than C$30,000 annual income received parental leave benefits under EI. Notably, low-income families are far better off living in Québec, with a 41.8 percentage point difference between receipt of parental benefit in Québec (85.4%) compared to the

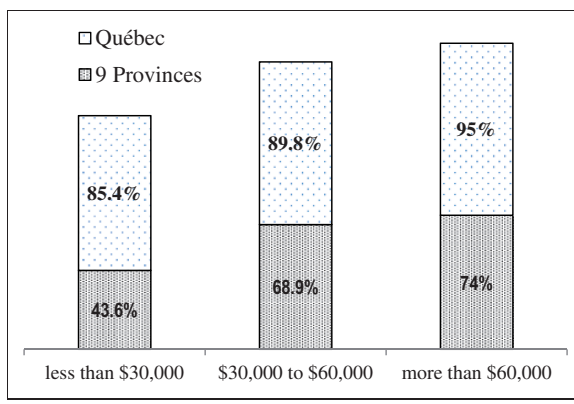

Figure 2. Proportion of mothers who received maternity and/or parental benefits by household income and program, 2013.
Source: Statistics Canada EICS 2013, custom tabulation.

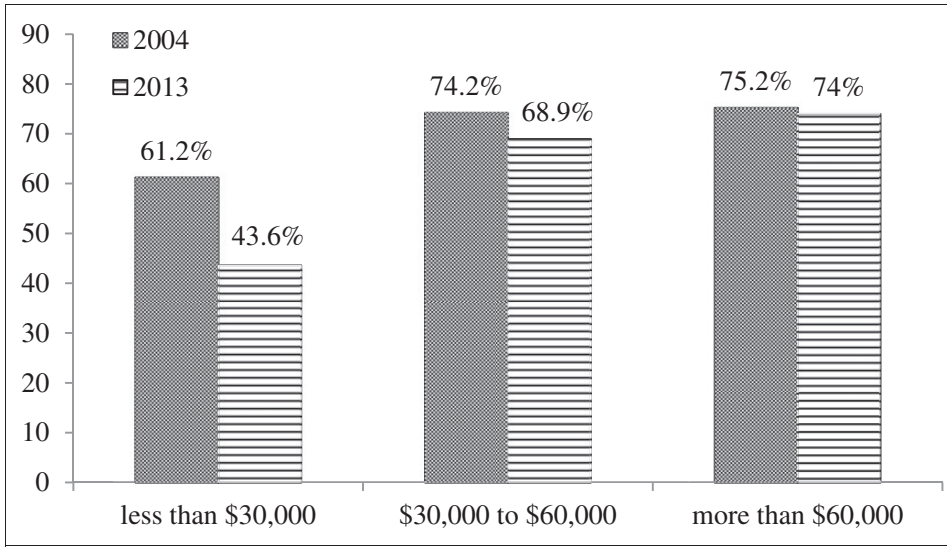

Figure 3. Proportion of mothers who received maternity and/or parental benefits by household income, EI program, 9 Provinces, 2004 and 2013.
Source: Statistics Canada EICS, 2004 and 2013, custom tabulation.
Note: Self-employed workers are only included in 2013.

nine provinces (43.6%) in 2013 (Figure 2). Trend data show that Québec has, in fact, reduced the disparity in receiving benefits between mothers in low- and high-income families over time. More than 81% of mothers in families earning over C$30,000 have consistently received QPIP benefits since 2007 (not shown, EICS, custom tabulation). By comparison, take-up among families earning less than $30,000 increased by 21 percentage points over six years, from 63.7% in 2007 to 85.4% in 2013.

Figure 3 takes a closer look at the receipt of benefits by mothers for families by income bracket under EI in the nine provinces using two points in time, 2004 and 2013. Although the proportion of mothers receiving benefits from EI was lower in 2013 than in 2004 among all three income brackets, the drop was much steeper for lower-income families. While 61.2% of lower-income mothers received benefits in 2004, that proportion fell to 43.6% in 2013. In addition, the gap between rates of benefits take-up for mothers whose income fell on different sides of C$30,000 was wider in 2013. More specifically, in 2004, women whose household income was between C$30,000 and C$60,000 received benefits by 13 percentage points more often than women living in households with an income below C$30,000, and in 2013, the gap between rates of parental benefit take-up increased to 25.3%. Having an income above C$30,000 thus increasingly determined the use of leave benefits over time in the rest of Canada. We do not know what explains the difference in the use of benefits between 2004 and 2013; these trends require further research.

Discussion

Our comparison of programs reveals that far greater access and equality of access by income are achieved in Québec under QPIP than in the rest of Canada under EI. Further, we found that annual household income makes a difference to mothers' access to parental leave benefits, particularly for families earning less than $30,000 per year in the ROC. In this section, we interpret the evidence, analyze potential barriers to access in the EI program, and address policy and theoretical implications.

Our analysis quantifies a stark divide in Canada between the parental-leave rich and parental-leave poor, the extent of which is foremost evident in each program's determination of which mothers are included and excluded based on household income. As demonstrated, access to parental benefits is contingent upon program/place of residence – Québec versus the ROC – as well as household income. It is possible that there are other variables confounding our results, such as labour-force participation rates or education. However, geographic differences in employment relations and education between Québec and the ROC are minimal. Dual-earner families constitute 72.8% of all Québec families and 69.1% of all ROC families (Uppal, 2015). Québec women worked on average 32 hours per week from 2001 to 2013, and women in the nine other provinces worked 33 hours per week (Statistics Canada, 2016). Fathers taking leave instead of mothers can also be ruled out as an explanation, based on ample research showing that apart from Québec's paternity leave, mothers dominate leave time in Canada (see e.g. McKay, Marshall and Doucet, 2012), and because the survey combines maternity and parental leave. We hypothesize that the greatest reason for program coverage variation is benefit eligibility criteria. QPIP's comparatively low threshold of C$2000 earnings in the previous year is significantly different from the EI requirement of 600 hours of employment over the same period. Just as policy design has a strong influence on the gendered use of parental leave, our analysis reveals the extent to which policy design affects social stratification.

Studies have identified that insufficient hours constitute a barrier to EI parental leave benefits access. In EICS data, about 25% of parents in the ROC did not work enough hours to qualify to receive parental leave benefits in 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2013. A 2012 EI Monitoring and Assessment report also recognized that accumulating 600 hours of employment as the eligibility threshold for special benefit programs varies by gender, job permanency, and full-time versus part-time employment categories (ESDC, 2012). Although women use more special benefits, men were found to have a 3% higher eligibility rate than women (92.3% for men and 89.2% for women in December 2010) 'due to women being more likely to work part time than men and accumulating fewer insured hours' (ESDC, 2012: 77). A 2010 government study found that almost all full-time workers (96.6%) would have had sufficient hours to qualify for EI special benefits, but only 64.6% of part-time workers would have been eligible (ESDC, 2012). Union research on access to regular EI also found that non-standard (part-time, contract, or precarious) workers applying for regular benefits have difficultly accumulating 600 insurable hours

Table 2. Length of service to earn entitlement for unpaid parental leave by weeks of continuous employment with the same employer.

At least 52 weeks	At least 31 weeks	At least 20 weeks	At least 13 weeks	No minimum
Alberta	Manitoba	Newfoundland	Ontario	British Colombia
Nova Scotia		Prince Edward Island		New Brunswick
Yukon		Saskatchewan		Québec
Nunavut		Canada (24 weeks)		
Northwest Territory				

Source: Doucet et al., 2015.

(Smirl and Fernandez, 2012). We can infer that applicants for parental benefits experience the same challenge.

Another potential barrier to accessing EI leave benefits in the ROC is jurisdictional complexity. Parents without the right to job-protected, unpaid leave are unlikely to access either leave benefit program. As noted earlier, all 14 federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions have separate employment standards legislation based on slightly different continuous employment period requirements.[8]

The bold vertical line in Table 2 divides sub-national eligibility criteria for job-protected unpaid leave to show that in all jurisdictions except Ontario, British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Québec, continuous employment duration exceeds the federal leave benefit eligibility requirement. Workers may have the 600 hours (17 weeks full-time) required for leave benefits, but not enough continuous employment to be entitled to job-protected leave.

The structure of labour market based leave benefit programs means financial support for performing social reproductive work depends on the quality of parents' attachment to the labour market. Our analysis shows that, in Canada, low-income households are contributing to both leave programs as a form of obligatory social insurance but are disproportionately not benefiting from them. In other words, there is an unequal redistribution of money from all employers and employees to mothers in higher-income households, especially in the liberal regime outside Québec. The EI program is based on 'the principle of universal coverage of all employees in insurable employment', but it is not achieving this goal in spite of carrying a surplus for many years (ESDC, 2012/13: 112). In our view, the category 'employees in insurable employment' includes mothers who contributed to EI prior to the year before the birth and as close as a week after the birth of a child. The pattern of increasing the duration of benefits and broadening categories of caregivers and receivers has done nothing to improve equality of access to benefits.

Conclusion

In this article, we investigated whether mothers living in households with different incomes had equal access to parental benefits under the QPIP program in the

province of Québec and the EI program in the ROC. Guided by a social reproduction framework, which explores the inter-connected relationships among households, paid and unpaid work, and the mediating role of state policies, we highlighted how both parental leave programs are offered on an individual basis, with eligibility contingent upon labour market attachment. We argued that, by design, there are inequalities in access to parental leave benefits, which leave some families parental-leave poor and others parental-leave rich. Patterns of inequality occur both by program and by income, but to different extents, which points to program design – especially eligibility criteria – as a key explanation for differences in receipt of parental leave benefits. We showed that more families are parental-leave rich in Québec than in Canada: in 2013, 35.7% of women in the nine provinces did not receive maternity and/or parental leave benefits, whereas that proportion was only 10.7% in Québec. Put differently, in 2013, mothers in Québec received benefits by 25 percentage points more than mothers in the other provinces. We also showed that household income matters to receipt of parental leave benefits. Québec dramatically improved the number of mothers in lower-income families in receipt of benefits compared to the other provinces (by 41.8 percentage points in 2013) and reduced the disparity in receiving benefits between mothers in low- and high-income households. By contrast, in the rest of Canada, having an annual household income above C$30,000 made a significant difference to receipt of leave benefits. Mothers in families earning $30,000 per year or less, living outside Québec, are by far the least in receipt of support for social reproduction. We thus point out a growing divide between Québec and the ROC, and between households with different incomes, in terms of parental leave benefits in the first year of an infant's life. The implication is that where parents live in Canada, and how much they earn, matters to whether and how social reproduction is supported.

This is the first study to quantify inequality of access, and its extent, within and across parental leave programs in Canada. It raises at least three larger implications for international studies of parental leave. The first implication relates to a social reproduction framework. From this theoretical perspective, Canada's two parental leave regimes demonstrate specific state, workplace, and family intersections. As Bezanson (2006: 27) has argued, 'The state thus plays a substantial role in establishing the *conditions* under which social reproduction takes place by regulating capital and the labour market and providing socialized services'. We have attended to one set of these conditions, specifically parental leave policy design and differences within one national context. Our analysis of survey data from Statistics Canada demonstrates that Canada's two labour market based parental leave benefit programs in fact benefit neither all employees nor all employers, and the extent of coverage depends heavily on policy design. Our comparison between a liberal (ROC) and a social democratic (Québec) social policy regime illustrates one aspect of the extent to which class inequality is retained in spite of the socialization of social reproduction as it occurs through government-sponsored labour market based insurance schemes. This finding also validates international research distinguishing liberal from social democratic welfare regimes.

The second implication of our study points to potential consequences of labour market based approaches for the work of social reproduction. While all Canadian workers and employers in the formal economy are contributing to parental leave benefits, some groups – notably low-income households – are consistently *not* receiving these benefits, thus indicating class discrimination in leave benefit policy as a systemic and structural inequality. The automatic exclusion of parents without insurable employment leads us to the view that labour market based leave benefit programs are flawed mechanisms for achieving equitable government support for the work of infant care. At the same time, our findings point out that the extent of class based stratification of social reproduction is influenced by policy design, with Québec's QPIP policy significantly mitigating class inequality in access to benefits. That is, while Québec's policy is also primarily a labour market, and not a care policy, the level of support and the assumptions governing its wider access are much more in line with what we, drawing on Tronto (2013), would refer to as a form of just or 'democratic' care.

Finally, a third implication of this research relates to the need to attend to, and begin to quantify, social class inequalities in the design of parental leave policies and the consequences of policy design for social inequalities. While there has been a large, and important, focus on gender inequalities in international studies on parental leave, this article is a call for attending to a wider range of intersectional differences in assessing the effectiveness and value of parental leave schemes. At the same time, this study has only scratched the surface of parental leave inequalities. Areas for future research include attending to the ratio of contribution to the three use variables of access, duration, and level of benefit for different groups of employers and employees. Among workers, the question of which parents are included and excluded needs to consider age, gender, education, family composition, race (including new immigrants), indigenous parents, and employment status (type of work arrangement, sector, tenure, permanency, wage earners versus self-employed). This research also raises questions about what these findings mean for other care recipients/caregiver combinations such as seniors and their adult children, and gravely ill children and their working parents. As more countries turn to market based solutions for care needs, including labour market leave benefit programs, more research is needed on which employees, employers, and families are benefiting and which are excluded from benefiting.

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Notes

1. In this article we use 'parental leave' to refer to maternity, parental and, when relevant, paternity leave.
2. Canada's federal government manages five 'special benefits' in addition to regular unemployment benefits. Special benefits include sickness benefits and four types of family care benefits: maternity leave benefits, parental leave benefits, Compassionate Care benefits (added in 2004 and enhanced in duration in 2015) (for a family member at significant risk of death) and Parents of Critically Ill Children benefits (added in 2012).
3. More details about the EICS can be found at: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4428 (accessed 15 July 2015).
4. Employee earnings through employer-sponsored leave plans that are registered in the Supplemental Unemployment Benefit program are not taxed.
5. QPIP was introduced as the third and final component of Québec's 1997 family policy.
6. QPIP also eliminates the ROC's two-week waiting period for obtaining benefits – parents receive benefits as soon as they withdraw from the labour market to perform care work.
7. In 2001, Québec parents with insurable incomes actually claimed less benefits than those in the ROC.
8. Federal and provincial human rights statutes are also important in establishing anti-discrimination clauses.

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